

# **MODERN THEOLOGIES OF REVELATION**

**Domenic Marbaniang**

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## 8. THE BIBLE

A study of the Bible shows that authentic revelation is chiefly verbal. By this is not meant that visions, dreams, theophanies, miracles, and spiritual understanding have not been means of divine communication. What is meant is that revelation comes in an authentic, reliable, and knowable form only through verbal communication. Even in visions, dreams, and supernatural phenomena what ultimately constitutes revelation is verbal testimony.

### 8.1. General Revelation Vs Revelation as Verbal Testimony

Nature cannot be revelatory of God in the same way that a watch is revelatory of a watch maker. Still in the case of the watch, one can have no idea of the specific watch maker, unless first of all he already knows the watchmaker or the watchmaker has inscribed his name on the watch. As far as nature is concerned, for some it *may* point to a Creator initially, but if the reasoning is taken to its logical conclusion then an entanglement in cosmology and ontology only proves to be a rational vexation. Reason cannot bridge the gap between necessity and contingency, infinity and finitude, immutability and mutation. This is evident from a study of religious theologies all over the world.

Man confronts nature in the same manner that he confronts any object of the world. Of course, nature bears marks of great design and intelligence. But as Hume and others noted, it also bears marks of imperfection in the sense that it is uncertain how one can proceed from nature towards the knowledge of a perfect and infinitely wise Lord. Secondly, it is even impossible to know from nature itself whether this designer is eternal (if the concept means anything empirically speaking) or temporal.

Psalms 19, 148, Acts 14: 17, and Romans 1: 18-32 are testimonies of believers in God. In the Psalms the poetical language involves nature into worshipping God; it must not be interpreted as proof for divine reality. That men all over the world have a knowledge of God's goodness and justice (Acts 14: 17; 28: 4) doesn't mean that primitive man, after the evolutionary model, bereft of even a

primitive notion of God, saw in nature the face of God. Why not suppose that a preacher like Noah had instilled such knowledge in his descendents? Missionary anthropological studies show that the Biblical accounts of creation, fall, and divine wrath over all the earth in the form of flood, are found in different cultures of the world with some mingled anticipation of a Savior even.<sup>1</sup>

## 8.2. Revelation as Verbal Testimony

The Bible begins with God. God is not proved but assumed. The assumption is not hypothetical but final. 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' The Bible begins with a God who acts, creates, names, and blesses. God's revelation began with speaking. The revelation of God was doubted by speaking. Truth and falsehood are the concern of revelation. Jesus himself, the revelation of God in flesh, came to bear witness to the Truth, even as the Scriptures testify of Christ.<sup>2</sup> Without the verbal testimony of Scriptures and the verbal testimony of Christ there is no way to see how men could have come to a faith in Christ. Of course, the testimony was attested by signs and wonders. But in its own communicative form, revelation is verbal. The words are the central part of the revelation of which supernatural events are only peripheral.

This doesn't mean that God does not communicate through the Spirit in the event of prophecy or the word of wisdom or the word of knowledge. It only means that such communication can only be 'profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness' if it is verbally communicated. The attestation of the preacher's consistent life-style,<sup>3</sup> of the Spirit's continuing attestation through supernatural intervention,<sup>4</sup> and the pragmatism of the propositions<sup>5</sup> do not constitute revelation but only aid the crediting of divine revelation. Believing

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Don Richardson, *Eternity in their Hearts*, rev. edn. (California: Regal Books, 1984)

<sup>2</sup> John 18: 37, 5: 39

<sup>3</sup> 1 Timothy 4: 12; Matthew 7: 15-20

<sup>4</sup> Mark 16: 20; Hebrews 2: 3,4

<sup>5</sup> John 15: 7

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in Jesus is not separable from believing his word.<sup>6</sup>

### 8.3. Jesus Christ and the Verbal Testimony: Finality of Revelation

In the prophetic word of Jesus Christ is the finality of divine revelation. As far as encounter with God himself is concerned, without doubt in Christ dwells 'the fullness of the Godhead bodily.'<sup>7</sup> But that fullness of glory has not yet been manifest to mankind. To men Jesus appeared as an ordinary man.<sup>8</sup> Men caught a glimpse of his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration.<sup>9</sup> But he is yet to be revealed in the fullness of his glory.<sup>10</sup> Presently, the only way to see Christ is through the Scriptures<sup>11</sup> until his final unveiling. Thus, Christ is the finality of the *empirical, incarnate,, and salvific revelation of God, the Word made flesh*.<sup>12</sup> Without doubt, similarly, the Bible (the Old and New Testament) is the finality of the *rational, inscribed, and salvific revelation of God*.<sup>13</sup> In the Bible one sees with spiritual eyes the Truth of God.

The Bible is the perfect record of the prophetic word in its final form. The Old Testament is the record of God's prophetic word by the prophets to our fathers (Hebrews 1:1); the New Testament, the record of God's prophetic word by his Son Jesus Christ in its finality (Hebrews 1:2). The finality of the prophetic word of Christ was not completed at his ascension but in the complete unveiling of the mystery of His will, as related to the Church, to the apostles by the Spirit of Christ,<sup>14</sup> whereby it was completed, sealed, and secured.

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<sup>6</sup> Psalm 106:24; John 2:22; 4:50; Acts 4:4; 13:48; Ephesians 1:13

<sup>7</sup> Colossians 2: 9

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 53: 2; Mark 6: 3

<sup>9</sup> 2 Peter 1: 16-17

<sup>10</sup> 2 Thessalonians 1: 7-10; Matthew 24: 30

<sup>11</sup> 1 Peter 1: 8

<sup>12</sup> 1 John 1: 1-3; 3: 2; John 1: 14; 1 Peter 1: 23

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 5: 17-19; 2 Timothy 3: 16, 17

<sup>14</sup> John 14: 17; 16:7-13; Ephesians 3: 2-11; Revelation 1: 1-3; 22: 17-21

## **8.4. The Nature of the Written Testimony**

8.4.1. Spirituality. The Bible is Divinely-Humanly spiritual. It is God-breathed (2 Timothy 3: 16) and came not by the will of man 'but holy men of God spoke moved by the Holy Ghost' (2 Peter 1: 20, 21). Thus, though the Bible is also human, it is not carnal. The written word is spiritual<sup>15</sup> because it is generated by the will of the Spirit of God. Therefore, the humanity of Bible doesn't imply its frailty. The Bible as spiritual is also perfect. In the same manner that the Son of God as the Son of man was blameless, the word of God as written by human authors is also blameless.

Further, since the Bible is spiritual its message is also spiritual. Though it is rationally understood, its deeper truths cannot be comprehended except through an understanding of spiritual categories through experience and practice characteristic of an obedient and devoted walk in the Spirit.<sup>16</sup> Obviously, if the spiritual categories themselves are not understood, a rational analysis would only prove futile. As Wittgenstein saw it, the meaning of a word depends on how it is used in its own context, the language game; one cannot understand it unless one enters that form of life. The Bible is the basis for true and genuine spiritual experience. Any spiritual experience that conflicts with the Spirit-inspired prophetic word of the Bible is false.<sup>17</sup>

8.4.2. Authority. The Bible is the only authoritative guide to an experiential knowledge of the living and personal God, his heart and his mind. As authoritative, the Bible is perfect and inerrant, for it is the speech of God himself. Thus, a reference to the Scripture is a reference to the final authority of divine word. The Scripture is not God, but the testimony of God. The Spirit of God is the authority behind it. Even the human author has no authority over it, far be the interpreter. When revelation is understood, man becomes responsible and is left with no excuse.<sup>18</sup> The Scripture as the prophetic word of God is the irrefutable proclaimer of all that man needs to know from God.

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<sup>15</sup> Romans 7: 14

<sup>16</sup> 1 Corinthians 2: 13, 14; Hebrews 5: 14

<sup>17</sup> 1 John 4: 1, 2; 1 Timothy 4: 1-3

<sup>18</sup> John 15: 22

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The Scripture not only has a hindsight, insight, and foresight of divine will, it also declares that will to historical man.

And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham....<sup>19</sup>

The authority of Scripture also implies that it is infallible. Unless it is infallible, it can have no complete authority. Partial infallibility means partial authority, total infallibility means total authority: the Bible is decisive in all areas of the believers life. What about the discrepancies then? The question to ask is, are the discrepancies by the Spirit or by the copyists or by the bias of the interpreter? The alternative would be to say that the revelation of God was infallible but the inscribing of the revelation along with the record of other details by humans is fallible. This assumes that God is not interested in writing his word; he is only interested in speaking his word or displaying himself to men. But, if God is anything serious with the communication of his word and if his word is crucial to man, then there is all reason that he ensures the rational finality of it in its written form – to the words themselves and not just the thoughts. It is even more amazing that God should choose to mix his revelation with the lies of men, though unintentional. Christ's testimony that 'Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled'<sup>20</sup> proves that the inscribed words themselves are important. Therefore, Scriptural infallibility and inerrancy cannot be compromised without damage to the character of God himself. And there is no absolute and undefeatable reason for rejecting Scriptural infallibility and inerrancy.

8.4.3. Testimony. The Bible is the written testimony of God. It is not an end within itself. One cannot believe the word without faith in the speaker of the word.<sup>21</sup> The Testifier cannot be separated from the testimony.<sup>22</sup> The person of God himself is

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<sup>19</sup> Galatians 3: 8 (KJV)

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 5: 18

<sup>21</sup> Mark 5:36; Luke 8:12; 8:13; John 5:38; 17:20; Acts 15:7; 1Thessalonians 2:13

<sup>22</sup> John 15: 22, 23

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behind the word. It is God's word. The experience of God in spiritual experience of prayer, spirit-empowered ministry, spirit-filled living, and spiritual battles with the kingdom of darkness are inseparably connected to the testimony of the word. Where this connection is uncertain, the experience itself is doubtful; for God's word is true. It cannot be doubted, for it is the hearing of his word that generates faith.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, it may be concluded that the Bible is the verbal, rational, spiritual, final, and authoritative testimony of all that God wants man to know for life, divine fellowship, and salvation. The Biblical testimony is not exhaustive information about the world. It is inscribed guide to make one wise unto salvation and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.<sup>24</sup> However, the word is unprofitable unless it is mixed with faith,<sup>25</sup> ultimately faith in God himself.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Romans 10: 17

<sup>24</sup> 2 Timothy 3: 16, 17

<sup>25</sup> Hebrew 4: 2

<sup>26</sup> Psalm 78: 22; John 20: 31



# CONCLUSION

Theology and science do differ in their approaches. Theology has been claimed to be a science. However, to treat it as a science is to assume that divine reality has to be approached in the same manner that nature is approached. This kind of a method has been decried by theologians like Barth himself for whom theology doesn't begin with man but with God, not with reason but with faith. A scientific approach to divine reality doesn't give as definite results as a scientific approach to empirical reality since divine reality is not as analyzable as nature is. Therefore, the need of revelation.

Revelation tells us what God wants us to know. However, since revelation is verbal, it is rational. That means, it must be rationally approached. In revelation, reason has the help whereby one understands God's law for his life and responds by obedient faith. Understanding is limited to the revelatory content. Any attempt to go beyond the revelatory content is futile.<sup>1</sup> Reason, however, is aided by the convicting and illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> However, if the authority of revelation is doubted reason is at loss since it is forced, without the confidence of faith, to become the arbitrator of divine knowledge, which is too high and impossible task for it. This is a problem that the theologies of Barth, Brunner, DeWolf, and Bloesch, do not take seriously. For them Scriptural infallibility is not so necessary a doctrine. God's revelation is not hindered by the falsehood of certain portions of Scripture. As a matter of fact, this only tends in the direction of the view that the Scripture is not *written* by the will of God though the revelation was the initiative of God. It also implies that God is not seriously concerned about the written word since he has decided to communicate through the spoken word alone. However, these theologians do not specify how such assumptions of theirs about God are justified. In fact, they even name these assumptions which are clearly evident in them.

The encounter theory seems too implausible. It is difficult to

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 29: 29

<sup>2</sup> John 16: 8-13; Ephesians 1: 17, 18

imagine how the Word of God underlying the words of men is to be encountered personally except by some Zen enlightenment kind of mystic approach to the words, which by the way are fallible guides. It is also a great and heavy task that God seems to have laid before man to sort out the Word of God from the words of men as in DeWolf. The expression may be forgiven, but the pharisaic practice of lading the spiritually athirst with humanly constructed burdens has not died off.

Thus, if ever it is believed that revelation is crucial, it must also be believed that the words God has chosen to bear his will are also absolute, unambiguous, perfect, authoritative, infallible, and final.

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